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THE PENETANGUISHENE PROGRAM: A PERSONAL REVIEW

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There is some discussion these days about the application of the principles underlying the programs operating in the Social Therapy Unit at Penetanguishene to penitentiaries and reformatories. This discussion seems to be based on the observation that our patient population in the Social Therapy Unit is not much different than that of a prison, that our graduates do not seem to be worse off as a result of their incarceration, that there is high inmate and guard morale, a remarkably low incidence of security problems, low suicide and self mutilation rate, low staff-inmate ratio, and antiquated physical plant. The following is an attempt to very briefly explain the nature of the coercive milieu therapy that is practiced in the Social Therapy Unit and to translate that program into prison terminology. This description is followed by a rather cryptic statement of 10 basic principles which seem vitally important to the success of this type of program.

Underlying "The Penetanguishene Program" is the belief that the system is more important than the individual. All attempts in the Social Therapy Unit have been to alter the total milieu of the inmate, leaving nothing in his life that is counter-productive in terms of the re-education process. Central to this re-education is the fostering of a social system which embodies, to paraphrase Jack Seelye: that, (R.F. 1)

"A number of complex simplicities: simplicities of relation, focus, value and product". The relation is one which joins the parties to it, in perhaps the greatest intimacy, combined with the greatest distance that is in the compass of human experience. One inmate must stand close enough to another to be his friend, far enough away to see what is happening. The focus is upon making what is unconscious, conscious. This is a two way street, a process of mutual education. What each inmate discovers of himself to his companion is part of his contribution, what he discovers of his companion to his companion is the other half. The paramount and only necessary joining value on both sides is the pursuit of truth, and the process is the continuous examination of the world as it is mirrored and distorted in the self, and the self as it is projected and distorted in the world. As Seeley concludes, "the product is, at the minimum, two people who know more about each other, each about the world, and each about himself. That is all. Perhaps that is enough."

In this process we see the inmate as the principal agent of re-education. Our experience suggests that the inmate is in many ways better equipped than the professional for a direct helpful encounter. For one thing he lives with the other inmates for twenty-four hours a day, works, eats and enjoys recreation with him. For example, he is immediate to the others, has no formal power over them, and is much closer to their mode of experience than any professional. And finally, he is committed to a parallel experience in a way

those unaccustomed to thinking in these terms is the fact that the shortcomings of individual inmates tend to cancel out in groups, where the correct administrative checks and balances have been established.

If it is desired to try to change behaviour, then it is a gross waste of an inmate's time to provide him with a milieu that reinforces his criminal behaviour for twenty-three hours of a day, and then attempt in perhaps one hour of the day some sort of experience aimed at reversing the process. Ideally, the inmate should be allowed no experience that does not in some way contribute to his re-education, and every minute of his stay ought to be designed to bring about a change in his ability to cope when released.

To make the statement that inmates should not be allowed any unhelpful experience is, of course, to stumble into the thorny question of coercion. To what extent is force legitimate in re-educating inmates who are incarcerated because of attitudes and behaviour they do not recognize as self defeating or wish to change. We think that all inmates should be offered the opportunity of a re-education program aimed at reducing recidivism, and those who accept the offer ought to be committed to the program for a fixed period of time set in advance, probably a minimum of six months, with no possibility of changing their mind during that time. To go further, we believe that throughout the entire prison system sufficient coercion to keep the system open so that the weakest inmate

can without fear report abuses from other inmates is justified. The so called humane warehousing or "hands-off" approach with an absence of mandatory open discussion by inmates about significant inter-personal events within the inmate milieu, is not a humane way to run a prison. It is our opinion that the covert coercive practices of the more powerful penitentiary inmates (and guards) is far more dangerous than the open and obvious coercive practices utilized in Oak Ridge in an attempt to guarantee everyone's protection and freedom of speech. We recognize however, the obvious paradox that in order to preserve freedom of speech, somethings cannot be said.

The most basic program in the Social Therapy Unit at Penetanguishene is the Training Unit through which all new inmates are admitted. This unit is run like a school with a principal and teachers who are inmates who have already adopted the new inmate - guard culture of openness and communication. What is taught is a number of inmate-written papers aimed at exposing the new trainee to information that will be helpful during the re-education process. The principles of feedback, the basic defence mechanisms, the ways in which people manipulate each other, role functions in groups, bad logic and other ways of fouling up discussion groups, etc. Every few days the inmate trainees are given written and oral exams to indicate how much of the material they have intellectually absorbed. To enhance motivation, their privileges - bedding, eating utensils, reading materials, and the privilege of word

work, are related to success or failure on these examinations. While the explicit function of the Training Unit is to teach material related to the re-education process, the implicit purpose is to demonstrate to the trainee that the full weight of administrative authority will descend on him if he retreats from the principles of openness and communication to the traditional inmate sub-cultural norms. These have been defined as believing that the most important thing in the world is to "do your own time". You mind your business, I'll mind mine, except when I want to screw you or take your tobacco or money, in which case it's every man for himself, with the one provision that NOBODY RATS. A rat is a man who tells things to the staff.

After four to eight weeks in the Training Unit inmates graduate to units with relatively greater freedom where all inmates are members of one or another of seven or eight member committees which run the unit. We have found that our 38-man ranges seem to be an ideal size for the social system that has evolved.

The Inmate-Staff Liaison Committee is responsible for program planning and organization, the Small Groups Committee is responsible for selection of ad hoc groups built around individuals experiencing current problems, the Clarification Committee is responsible for clarifying and reporting to the ward meeting the precise details of instances of inter-personal

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difficulties on the ward, the Sanctions Committee is responsible for deciding the action to be taken for particular deviant behaviour, the Security Committee is responsible for immediate physical control of any threatened or actual incidents of physical violence, and the Ward Committee is responsible for housekeeping functions on the ward - laundry, cleaning, etc.

Twice a day, seven days a week the entire community assembles for community meetings of one and one-quarter hours each. The first of these serves as a feedback centre for committees: the preceding twenty-four hours are reviewed, committee decisions relayed and discussed. The second is concerned with the discussion of small group activities, focusing upon the problems of individual inmates. For an hour and a quarter each day on six days a week the entire ward subdivides into small groups which are assembled on the basis of individual inmate needs. When a ward member is "shook-up" as the inmates say, that is depressed or hostile, threatening to act out, etc., the Small Groups Committee forms a group of from four to eight inmates who are considered the most suitable group for him to talk to under the particular circumstances of the crisis, selecting from among people who were involved, people who had experienced similar situations, his current friends or enemies. Small groups are assembled to make periodic reviews of an inmate's progress, to examine his motivation for a particular act, or to make specific recommendations that a committee did not have the time to.

consider at sufficient length.

For an hour each day, seven days a week, the ward subdivides into fixed dyads, and for a further hour, fixed triads. That is, each inmate is locked in a room with one (dyad) or two (triad) other inmates. No inmate is allowed to write, read or sleep. He is expected to talk or to listen. These dyads and triads remain constant: that is the same groups of two and three people meet for an hour in a locked room each day for as long as they are in the Unit. This sort of grouping is based on the assumption that in any close relationship a person will encounter obstacles to communication from which he may unhelpfully choose to withdraw. If, however, he is forced to stay with the person or persons involved in the situation for an hour a day indefinitely, he is forced to solve the problem, usually by identifying those aspects of himself and the other person which created the difficulty.

The status of dyads and triads is discussed in dyad and triad groups of six inmates, which subsequently feed back into dyad and triad ward meetings. Much of the most meaningful interaction takes place in these groupings of two and three people, where the evolution of a relationship is made much more apparent to the partners by its forced continuity.

Perhaps the most important structural characteristics of the inmate committee system is the way it operates with little dependence on guards to initiate and sustain proceedings.

No. 2

Aim to strengthen not lessen static security --

All too often "progressive" innovations in custodial institutions are measured in terms of increased physical freedom for the inmates. This seems a very short-sighted view in our experience for two reasons. (1) Psychological freedom is a more important ingredient in a total institution than physical freedom; and (2) increased physical freedom, when it goes wrong, is the quickest route to retaliative repressive measures stemming from public reaction, political reaction, and reaction to those in authority farther up the line.

Since guards in custodial institutions see themselves primarily as security staff, it is a direct assault on their identity to do anything which weakens security in their eyes. Our strategy has been to accompany any new program variation with heightened security, that is, security slightly in excess of what the guards would deem reasonable until the decision comes from the guards themselves as to what is an adequate level of security. In our experience, guards (who do know more about security than professionals) HAVE good judgment in these matters when it is not clouded by real or imagined threats from professional staff innovations.

No. 3

Lose the battles but win the war

Professional staff must operate as mediators to prevent polarization between inmates and guards. This mediating function is clearly not possible if professional staff are themselves polarized either against inmates or more likely against guards. In our experience, no individual battle over a particular inmate or a particular incident is worth winning (even if winning is possible with structural authority) if it jeopardizes the acceptance in the guards' eyes of the professional as a reasonably trustworthy ally. If one can comfortably lose ten battles a week (before they are even seen as battles) it seems very much more possible to be able to achieve a long term (5 years) objective of shifts toward more enlightened life within the institution.

No. 4

At all times what is best for the group or system as a whole must take precedence over what is best for the individual inmate

Clinical training is so heavily weighted toward individual care that this type of system programming comes hard. It seems morally wrong and is certainly emotionally very trying to see a particular inmate suffer because of the injustices of the wider system. No inmate will receive any assistance independent of the wider system however, and it seems a matter of logic (rather than heart) that steps taken to improve the

No. 5

In conflicts with individual inmates,
the guard is always right, especially
when he is wrong

The role of a guard in a re-education program is likely to involve more stress than either inmates or professionals must endure. The guards do not have a role which permits symptoms (as the inmate role does) or a role which compensates for high stress by high salaries, high prestige and relative ease of mobility (as does the role of the professional staff). In our experience, all guards must know that in any battle vis-a-vis an inmate, they will always be the winner and always be supported by line authority. Obvious exceptions of course are the contravention by a guard of the rules of conduct for guards. Only when the guard knows he will be supported, no matter what he does, can he have the internal strength to learn by his own mistakes.

No. 6

Guards must be instructed not to
participate directly in programs

Since inmates become more skillful at covering up their emotionally vulnerable areas, and more adept with words than the guards, it is unfair to allow guards to participate in the verbal exchanges in re-education groups. Inmates must frequently be reminded that at all times they are to respond to the guards as though they were always right and always

this dictum has been accepted well by the inmates when it has been put forward as being as immutable as the architecture. The guards feel supported by such a policy and are able to admit mistakes and function more helpfully under such an edict.

No. 7

Both professional staff and the guards
must feel responsibility for security
and re-education

Any splitting of the security and re-education function seems clearly destructive. If guards are scapegoated by professional staff as the bad guys who impose silly rules, and hold themselves out as the good guys, they maliciously and directly undermine security. From a strictly theoretical point of view, such an artificial division is unrealistic and a bad model for inmates. In practical terms, when guards see professional staff genuinely concerned about security, their sense of confidence in those staff is increased. The other side of the coin - when guards see professional staff genuinely impressed with a guard's real ability to help inmates, their working relationships are improved.

No. 8

Don't make any changes without
consensus of key guards and key
inmates

One of the easiest traps is to get lured into a coalition with those guards and inmates who are most sympathetic with the program innovator's views. This is clearly a suicidal course of action if those inmates or guards do not have at least formal and more importantly informal power in the system. The power axis must always be between the program innovator, the most powerful guards, and the most powerful inmates. The programs must develop at the pace set by these persons if it is to survive.

No. 9

Maintain a balance of power between
introverted and extroverted inmates

In inmate-run coercive milieu programs, one of the most powerful checks and balances is the mixture of introverted and extroverted inmates. The relative inability of the introvert to describe the way he feels, and the further relative inability of the extrovert to draw on analogous emotional experience, have created a situation in many ways poignant for both personality types. We have found this polarity of personality types to be a major impetus towards change. Intelligent extroverts display great ability in observing details of behaviour, correctly describing it,

proposing practical alternatives, and organizing activities. The introverts offer much in terms of emotional support and empathy. For the individual, introvert or extrovert, this combination provides a multi-dimensional picture of his situation, and a wide range of resources within which to fulfill his needs. The program seems to be stabilized by this combination, which provides checks and balances, softening the raw practicality of the extrovert with the dreaminess of the introvert, introverted idealism with extroverted politics.

No. 10

Too many professional staff make the
programs inoperable

Professional staff are trained to help people. It is hard to be a "good" professional staff unless one sees oneself as helping people. If the inmates are to be the principle agents in the re-education program, the guard staff as a back-up resource, and the professional staff as a third-line only, there is room for only a few professional staff who work closely as a team primarily with key guards and key inmates, to make alterations in the system as a whole. Since large numbers of professional staff are not required for this job, any in excess of the absolute minimum will fall back on their training and hunt out individual inmates to help. No more effective undermining of the system of inmate-helping-inmate can occur, since inmates often have the belief (probably delusional) that professional staff are better at helping people by virtue of their training.

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